



Is the modern world caught in the grip of a fear psychosis and has a cult of safety entrenched itself the West? In this video, we are going to explore these questions.

“Quite an experience, to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave.”

*Blade Runner*

Today we live longer than ever before. Our chance of dying from war, natural disaster, pandemics, or starvation are at levels our ancestors could only have dreamed of. But given all this security we are more fearful than ever before. From all corners of society there are warnings of potential dangers and imminent disaster, and as the sociologist Barry Glassner observed:

“...we are living in the most fearmongering time in human history. And the main reason for this is that there’s a lot of power and money available to individuals and organizations who can perpetuate these fears.”

*Barry Glassner, Quoted in “Why We’re Living in the Age of Fear”*

But it is not just manipulative fearmongering that is responsible for the disproportionate fear that infects our society, for in one way or another we all accept, and reinforce, the normality of fearing. We continually remind ourselves and others that threats exist everywhere – in the streets, in the food we eat, in the technology we use, in our fellow man and woman, and even in the air we breathe. The cultural narratives which inform how we make sense of the world seamlessly move from one fear to another. Hardly anyone questions, however, whether we should be so fearful. In his book *How Fear Works* the sociologist Frank Furedi exposes our culture of fear, and as he writes:

“...in the current era fearing appears to be such a volatile and directionless activity. It seems as if one threat begets another, only to be contradicted by yet another newly discovered target of fear.”

Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century

Or as the philosopher Lars Svendsen likewise notes:

“There no longer seems to be anything that is really secure. . .We seem to be obsessed with every conceivable danger. . .Fear has become a basic characteristic of our entire culture.”

Lars Svendsen, A Philosophy of Fear

Life is unpredictable and the world is littered with dangers and threats to both our security and well-being, and so fearing is not unique to modern society. However, in some of the most flourishing civilizations of the past, fear was counterbalanced by hope and by an optimistic belief in the human potential. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment the idea that individuals and communities, through bold and creative action, could ward off dangers and shape the uncertain future, flourished. In Ancient Greece and Rome, courage was held in high regard and so individuals were proactive in the face of risks and daring in the presence of the unknown. “Fortune favours the brave”, according to the Latin proverb. Furthermore, in many past civilizations it was acknowledged that uncertainty is not only a source of potential danger but also of opportunity. But as Frank Furedi writes:

“That was then. In the twenty-first century, the optimistic belief in humankind’s ability to subdue the unknown has given way to a belief that it is powerless to deal with the perils that confront it...the flame of hope still flickers on but it is increasingly overshadowed by a dark mood of intangible anxiety.”

Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century

The courage, hope, and optimism that in civilizations past kept fear in check is all but lost in the modern world, and so the lives of many of us are consumed by fear. We see everything through the distorted lens of fear, and regarding this perspective Frank Furedi elaborates:

“...this perspective [of fear] has been so thoroughly internalized that many who adopt this outlook are not aware of its influence on their behaviour. For most people, such a perspective comes across as common sense. This does not mean that people are perpetually scared or fearful; rather, the perspective of fear works by sensitizing people to focus on potential threats and dangers while distracting attention from the probable positive outcome of engaging with uncertainty.”

Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century

In viewing the world through a perspective of fear, people see risks in things, behaviors, and activities which in generations past were not considered risky. They are overly fearful of threats which are an inevitable part of life. And they evaluate experiences first and foremost on the basis of the potential risks they entail.

“One of the accomplishments of the fear perspective is that it continually expands the number of issues that constitute a hazard and are therefore represented as risk. Since the 1980s numerous commentators have commented on the explosion of risks.”

Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century

What is more, the meaning of risk has taken on a largely negative connotation. Up until the latter half of the 20th century, it was common sense that many risks are worth taking. So long as one was motivated by a noble enterprise, self-realization, by the spirit of adventure or by values such as freedom and truth, facing up to risks was acknowledged to be a precondition for the cultivation of character and even the accomplishment of greatness. Or as Nietzsche put it:

“The devotion of the greatest is to encounter risk and danger and play dice for death.”

*Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Instead of being celebrated, today the risk-taker is often castigated as foolish, selfish, and a danger to both himself and others. This negative perception of risk-taking is driven by worst-case thinking. Many people are predisposed to think of the worst that can happen, and then they behave as if it is likely to happen. This worst-case thinking has even infiltrated the highest levels of government, as some politicians and policy makers have adopted the utopian goal of socially-engineering a “zero-risk” society, and to the applause of the fearful masses.

“An ever-expanding obsession with risk is one of the most striking features of the culture of fear... In its most irrational version, some people demand ‘zero risk’ – a project that would require abolishing uncertainty completely.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*

In seeing risks almost everywhere and in being highly risk-averse, many people, without explicitly knowing it, are guided by the “precautionary principle.” According to the precautionary principle, when faced with any degree of uncertainty, the best option is to protect oneself and others and to side with caution. In recent years the precautionary principle has entrenched itself in public policy in the form of the inverted quarantine. While the purpose of a traditional quarantine is to seclude a sick person to prevent a disease from spreading to others, an inverted quarantine, in contrast, involves healthy people isolating themselves from the dangers they perceive as threatening, and as Furedi writes:

“Inverted quarantine constitutes a response to the fear that the human condition is inherently unsafe.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*

The belief that the human condition is inherently unsafe is the fundamental creed of the cult of safety, which has solidified itself in our society. In the last few decades safety has, in the words of Furedi, taken on a “quasi-religious quality”. The quest for safety has become the *raison d'être* of the West, and the rules and restrictions erected at the altar of safety have ballooned to absurd proportions and intruded on evermore areas of life. To make matters worse, no matter how irrational or authoritarian they are, and no matter whether there is any evidence they are effective, safety rules and restrictions are held by most people to be essential and beyond question.

“Safety and security have become their own arguments. Officials and organizations seem to believe that the mere mention of these words is enough—no further justification is needed...Safety rules are often assumed to be doing something good just because they exist. “Safety and security theater,”...describes procedures whose main role is to

convince everyone that someone somewhere is dealing with a threat, regardless of whether they are or not.”

*Tracey Brown and Michael Hanlon, Playing by the Rules: How Our Obsession with Safety Is Putting Us All at Risk*

An abundance of safety rules and restrictions are not making people feel safer; they are contributing to our culture of fear. For safety rules and restrictions communicate signals about potential dangers and threats, and so the more a society is inundated with them the more people assume that the environment is inherently unsafe. Furthermore, in placing limitations on the freedom to explore, experiment, and make one's own choices, rules and restrictions implicitly communicate to people that they are incapable of making their own risk assessments and assuming responsibility for their own life. The modern cult of safety is infantilizing people and increasing the chances that, from cradle to grave, they remain dependent on overbearing authority figures to keep them safe from what they have been socialized to believe to be a dangerous world.

“The act of trading in freedom does not make people feel safe. It heightens people’s awareness of their lack of control over their lives and thereby enhances their sense of insecurity. The loss of any of our freedoms simply undermines people’s capacity to deal with the threats they face.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*

Many safety rules and restrictions derive their perceived legitimacy from the authority of “The Science”. In contrast to science, which relies on evidence, experimentation, the testing of ideas, and whose conclusions are open to doubt and reinterpretation, The Science relies on trust in authority and does not tolerate skepticism. If The Science alerts us to a threat, or if politicians invoke The Science to justify heavy-handed measures, then those who refuse to blindly follow The Science are treated as the modern equivalent of a heretic.

“Statements like ‘The Science says’ serve as the twenty-first-century equivalent of the exhortation ‘God said’. Unlike science, the term ‘The Science’ serves a moralistic and political project. It has more in common with a pre-modern revealed truth than with the spirit of experimentation that emerged with modernity. The constant refrain of ‘Scientists Tell Us’ serves as a prelude for a lecture on what threat to fear...those who do not heed the warnings of experts are frequently castigated as irresponsible if not evil.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*

The fear that is infecting society is socially conditioned into us from a young age, and it is fuelled by a pessimistic conception of what it means to be human that is deeply entrenched in our society.

“...people are educated to be preoccupied with their safety, and to regard being fearful as a sensible and responsible orientation towards the world...Policy makers, opinion formers, and advertisers act on the basis that people are risk averse and feel powerless, and their messages normalize the perception that people are vulnerable.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*

This pessimistic conception of the human being is fundamentally flawed. For if vulnerability was the essential feature of the human being, the human race would have perished long ago. Although our lives are unpredictable and exposed, as humans we are more defined by our resilience and adaptability. Not only do we have a remarkable capacity to withstand threats, dangers, and hardships, but sometimes these even fast-track individual, familial, and societal growth.

The pessimistic pull of our culture of fear is strong. But if we can become more aware of how it operates, influences us, and shapes society, and if we can cultivate a more optimistic vision of the human condition and a courageous attitude toward the future, then it is possible to free ourselves from its crippling influence. Or as Furedi concludes in *How Fear Works*:

“Must we be defined by our vulnerability? Must we be fearful? The moment we ask these questions, we are well on the way to intuiting that there is always an alternative... Whether we adopt the philosophy of precaution or embrace a more courageous risk-taking approach depends on how [we perceive] what it means to be a human.”

*Frank Furedi, How Fear Works: Culture of Fear in the Twenty-First Century*